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I am making this submission as	Resident
Submission type	Personal
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	<p>I live in the Blue Mountains and have spent a large part of my life here. In fact, for my family, I am the third generation to have lived in this area. Bushfires have been a very real and respected threat, directly affecting my grandparent's and my parent's homes at different times over the past 7 decades. My father, uncles and family friends have been involved in fighting fires as volunteers in either the town or rural fire brigades and some of them remain involved to this day. I feel very fortunate to have grown up being taught how to take simple, basic actions when a fire front approaches and, most importantly of all, how to be prepared and not panic. Nevertheless, the fires of 2019-20 unnerved most of us, including friends and colleagues who have far more fire experience than I do. The sheer scale and intensity of these fires was beyond anything that could be described as normal. My submission draws on scientific evidence, where relevant, but mostly relates to my own experience or anecdotal</p>

evidence I have drawn from conversations with friends, family and colleagues.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

Climate change is undeniably a contributing factor in the bushfires of 2019-20. According to the latest science, cool weather rainfall has decreased in south-eastern Australia by around 11 percent since the 1990s which has directly impacted soil moisture, tree health and resilience, and increased the length of fire seasons. Underpinning this was one of the worst droughts on record and Australia's hottest year on record.

From my discussions with numerous highly experienced firefighters, this bushfire season was extraordinary. The sheer scale and ferocity of the bushfires had never been seen before. Fires were burning intensely on all sides, not just the 'front' of the fire that related to the prevailing wind. They jumped containment lines that ordinarily would have held the fire at bay. The fires behaved in ways contrary to what prior experience had dictated and where traditional responses were ineffective. The extreme unpredictability of the fires meant that some remote firefighting crews were left stranded overnight as fire had cut off their escape route and poor weather had made it impossible for any rescue via aircraft.

For any government to continue to deny the multiple and cumulative impacts of climate change on our communities is both reckless and unconscionable. The science behind the response to COVID-19 is accepted, both in terms of what it can answer and what is not yet known, and an appropriate set of immediate responses has occurred by all levels of government around Australia and the world. Those responses were necessary to save lives. So too, are the immediate responses required to save lives already affected by climate change and those that will be affected over the coming years and decades ahead.

ACTION REQUIRED:

- 1 Immediately and systematically reduce fossil fuel production in NSW, including thermal coal plants and gas fracking and any related subsidies
- 2 Strongly advocate to other states and territories and the federal government to do the same
- 3 Provide re-training and support to communities that will be affected by these changes
- 4 Rapidly transition to a mix of renewable energy including battery storage and electric vehicles, and decentralise the energy system to reduce the risk of widescale power outages and provide capacity for community ownership
- 5 Aggressively undertake mitigation works by:
 - expanding natural carbon sinks such as mangroves, native vegetation and seagrass beds
 - improving home energy efficiency through double glazing window subsidies & plugging air leaks
 - setting minimum building requirements for light coloured roofs and providing subsidies to repaint existing roofs in light colours, both with the aim of increasing reflectivity and reducing the heat-island effect.
 - undertake further research on regenerative agriculture as a viable option for farmers to reduce their carbon emissions and improve the resilience of their land in the face of ongoing climate change

1.2 Preparation and planning

Hazard reduction burning (HRB) is not a silver bullet and may actually cause more harm than good. According to independent experts, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service has more than doubled the amount of prescribed burning on parks estate over the past decade. This didn't stop or reduce the scale or severity of the 2019-20 bushfires. In fact, hazard reduction burning may actually be causing more problems than it is

alleviating, for example:

- The impact of prescribed burning on air quality has a significant impact on human health, with poor air quality impacting every cell in the human body according to recent research. Smoke from this summer's bushfires caused more deaths than the actual fires themselves
- Burning vegetation emits large amounts of carbon dioxide that exacerbates the impacts of climate change
- Regular burning of native vegetation changes the kind of vegetation that exists in an area. The plants that survive are more fire-prone and burn more easily, the moisture in the soil decreases, and wind increases through the landscape as the vegetation is opened up by the fire which in turn causes more drying.

However, fire has been a part of the Australian landscape for tens of thousands of years and plays an important ecological function for many native species. Aboriginal cultural burning uses quite different techniques to hazard reduction burning and may offer a viable alternative. There is anecdotal evidence that the amount of smoke released during cultural burning is lower than for HRBs, the burns are smaller in size, cooler, and have less impact on the landscape but are as effective as current practices.

ACTION REQUIRED:

1. Undertake rigorous research on the potential benefits of Aboriginal cultural burning as an alternative to current HRB practices (including fuel reduction, soil moisture retention, biodiversity impacts, and air quality results)
2. Hold a series of conversations with the community to openly discuss the constraints and impacts of current approaches, and the nuances involved in fire management, the limitations, unseen impacts, what alternatives might look like, and seek to understand what risks the community is willing to take (e.g. poor air quality vs property protection vs ecological management)

1.3 Response to bushfires

Overall, I believe the response to the bushfires, from the NSW Government, was commendable given the circumstances. Regular briefings by the Fire Commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, and the Premier were factual, calm and considered. The Fires Near Me app provided detailed updates on each fire at regular intervals and the fire prediction maps were a valuable tool in assessing where the fires were likely to spread on extreme weather days, which provided an opportunity to plan where to go or what preparations to make in advance.

There were some circumstances, however, that greatly hampered the effectiveness of the response. This included:

- A lack of aircraft to deliver water to the fireground. Both the Gospers Mountain and Green Wattle Creek fires had capacity to be contained in the first day or two of the fires commencing, had aircraft been available at those sites. But with all available aircraft deployed to other fires already burning across the state, these fires quickly grew out of control and became some of the largest and most devastating fires across the state.
- Relying predominantly on a volunteer base. Not only did relying on volunteers cause undue personal and financial strain on communities and businesses alike, it created a high level of unpredictability in responding to the long fire season. Volunteer crews who were assigned for a shift did not always turn up which disrupted the strategies that had been prepared for that day and reduced the ability of other crews to adequately respond to the demands of the fireground.
- A lack of personal protective equipment for volunteers. While this did not immediately affect the fire response, it has much longer term implications for the health of volunteers who spend many months fighting the bushfires, as well as reputational damage to the NSW Government for failing to adequately

resources their own agencies.

- The hierarchical, parochial and historical culture of the Rural Fire Service (RFS). Many individuals within the RFS display amazing courage, resilience and mutual respect but the way the agency functions as a whole does not contribute well to these values. The strongly hierarchical structure of the RFS limits the ability for genuinely collaborative cross-agency relations, particularly within the local fire control centres. There is a perception that the roles within the centre are appointed based on internal RFS hierarchies and individual personalities rather than merit and there is strong resistance and inflexible attitudes to any suggestions for change. Other emergency response agencies are viewed with suspicion and, in some circumstances, even contempt. It was rumoured that some local fire centres employed staff that were abusive and highly disrespectful. This, combined with perceived in-fighting on which fire centre (and which agency) had control of a fire, caused unwanted tensions and reduced the overall effectiveness of addressing the large landscape scale fires.

- The views of local fire crews were not taken into account. On a number of occasions, the lead for the on-ground fire response was given to fire crews from outside the area. Due to the hierarchical culture of the RFS, this resulted in intimate understandings of the local landscape being ignored in favour of a top down approach. This led to backburning operations getting out of control in some areas and far less effective methods being used in other areas.

- Inconsistent messaging in the early stages of the season. One fire chief was quoted as directing all Blue Mountains residents to leave the region. Not only was this impractical, particularly given that the entire eastern seaboard was dealing with bushfires, it was potentially highly dangerous. The Blue Mountains has two main highways with residents living along narrow ridgelines. If residents panic and all try to leave at once, there is a very real threat that the highways become blocked with traffic and people are left trapped in their vehicles as a fire approaches. This could have disastrous consequences.

ACTIONS REQUIRED:

1 Use the opportunity provided by the creation of the new government agency, Resilience NSW, to review the structure of the RFS and seek ways to better integrate all emergency response agencies using a flatter, more collegiate and collaborative approach.

2 Adequately resource emergency response agencies with best practice personal protective equipment, a full suite of suitable aircraft, compatible IT systems, and professional paid staff (volunteers should only make up a small proportion of the resources required)

3 Ensure fire response plans, including the different stages that are activated according to the escalation of risk, are clearly communicated by all emergency response staff from the outset with consistent messaging on what is expected from the community.

1.4 Any other matters

Alongside the recommendations made above, I believe more outward-facing education for the community is required in how to respond to bushfires, particularly a re-framing of the 'evacuation' message. This summer has demonstrated that for many bushfire prone communities, evacuation is not an option - there is simply nowhere else for them to retreat. Instead, there needs to be a concerted effort to train people in how to cope and respond to a bushfire. Perhaps a training program, similar to first aid training, could be designed so community members could choose to be neighbour or family 'fire champions' and be accredited in peer-to-peer advice on how to prepare for fires, including conducting simulated scenarios for residential dwellings. Regular refresher courses would keep the training relevant and up-to-date as

approaches potentially change over time.

While the Fires Near Me app is an excellent tool, some key features are lacking that were crucial for me and my community to assess the situation accurately as the fires progressed. These features relate to the maps and are:

- the inclusion of 'hot spots', or the active fire front, not just the area that had been burnt to date
- localised wind direction

It was possible to obtain these overlays by using other apps but if the NSW Government wants to ensure that the community is accessing accurate information directly from the government, it would be helpful to include these features in the current application.

ACTION REQUIRED:

1 Establish an accredited fire response training for community members to build the capacity of the community to prepare and remain safe during a bushfire

2 Build additional overlay features for the Fires Near Me app to include the active fire front and localised wind direction.

Upload files

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